

## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

---

### **Self-Construction and Social Transformation: Lifelong, Lifewide and Life-deep Learning**

by Paul Bélanger

Hamburg, Germany: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015, 286 pages

ISBN: 978-92-820-1204-8 (paperback)

### **Reviewed by/ Revu par**

Carl Ruest

University of British Columbia

“To learn is to continue to live and to live consciously” (p. 243).

For Paul Bélanger, lifelong learning is at the core of the construction and renewal of the self, as well as central to social action and transformation. Statistics tend to show that Canadian adults may agree with him. In 2010, close to half the Canadian adult population enrolled in a further education course, proportionally ten times more than in 1960. Moreover, 20% of the adult population reported wanting to take a course, but did not; that is over 4 million Canadians had an unmet demand for education (Livingstone & Raykov, 2013). Within today's economic and social realities, we are witnessing a transformation of people's increasingly non-linear learning biographies, and thus adult education is an issue that educators, policy makers and various governments alike cannot ignore. In his book *Self-Construction and Social Transformation*, Bélanger seeks to investigate the social issues involved in this adult autonomous learning. In order to do so, he first explores the issue of abuse as an alienating experience that compromises this autonomy, and then proposes ways to overcome these obstacles.

The book is divided in three parts. After discussing the intimate nature of learning along with its social component (Part One) and its recognition in various educational domains (Part Two), Bélanger explores policy implications (Part Three). In the first part, he explains that the intimacy of learning comes with a new vision of education that recognises the right to learn—learning not only to acquire basic knowledge and skills but to strengthen one’s freedom—as a human right. For the author, learning requires both emotional and rational intelligence; hence, “the production of constructing the self requires the personal appropriation of transferred knowledge” (p. 49). In other words, finding personal meaning in what we learn allows us to completely assimilate knowledge so that it can be activated and mobilized when needed. Moreover, issues such as lack of self-confidence and empathy, as well as failure at school, can impair the ability to learn and remove the joy that can be derived from these experiences. In addition to these private and individual aspects of learning, the intimacy of learning, this self-actualisation, becomes a social issue because of its importance in current economic changes and with the emergence of pluralistic societies.

Part Two discusses the implications of recognizing the intimacy of learning in different educational contexts. An important aspect of the intimacy of learning in the workplace is the acknowledgement of the learning demand duality (Chapter 5). To be successful, training programs must meet the company’s needs, but they also must meet the individual workers’ needs. If the workers feel the training has nothing to do with them, the programs’ success is compromised. Another type of program pertains to literacy, although the importance of these programs goes far beyond their necessity in the workplace (Chapter 6); such programs give their participants “greater autonomy or renewed sense of personal dignity” (p. 131). However, these programs must acknowledge that participants need to unlearn fears and traumas from past education.

The need for learning does not stop with retirement (Chapter 7). Bélanger argues that meeting seniors’ learning demands would not only benefit them, but also society at large. A way for them and other adults to learn is through popular education (Chapter 8). The author discusses the importance of this type of education for social action and describes some of its movements throughout various parts of the world. Popular education has social benefits; it contributes to socialisation, to correcting inequalities and to producing knowledge. Finally, analysing workplace bullying and harassment (Chapter 9) and

reversing its indicators allows light to be shed on conditions beneficial to the intimacy of learning.

Part Three concludes the book by reiterating concepts and examining how policies may take them into account. Early childhood and basic initial education (elementary and secondary) are fundamental for lifelong learning. In early childhood, various stimuli contribute to shaping the brain and affecting its future capacity to learn; educational programs must therefore be available to all children at this age. Elementary and secondary education must continue to develop curiosity, a passion for knowledge and self-confidence, qualities necessary for autonomous learning. Initial school years must therefore recognise the dynamic between the focus on content and the focus on the learner, which is central to the joy of learning. Inherent to this goal is the importance of a positive environment conducive to learning and free of bullying. Bullying not only undermines personal wellbeing and psychological integrity, but it also compromises the interest in future learning, creating a relationship between learning and negative feelings, and possibly leading to future cognitive problems.

Throughout adult life, certain conditions help to secure effective learning. In workplace-related training, the author states that too often government policies provide educational activities while ignoring the important preliminary mediation. This initial planning step allows those constructing programs to survey and consider the expectations of all people involved. Since the learning demand is twofold, it is important the educational programs are relevant for both the workplace and the individuals. Finally, the adult demand for education (including that of seniors) is not limited to work; a part of the adult population needs basic skills, while others want popular education in topics such as health, environment, parenting, and so on. Unfortunately, the author observes that too often market laws prevail in the supply of such programs. Policies should democratise the access to these programs, especially considering the social and economic benefits they bring.

*Self-Construction and Social Transformation*, available online in the UNESCO Open Access Repository and also available in French under the title *Parcours éducatifs: Construction de soi et transformation sociale* (Presses de l'Université de Montréal) is designed for educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers. By clearly presenting his ideas and reiterating the key points frequently, Bélanger has written a useful introduction

for people interested both in the issues of intimacy of learning and lifelong learning, concepts central to the mobility and autonomy of human beings.

## References

Livingstone, D., & Raykov, M. (2013). *Adult learning trends in Canada: Basic findings of the WALL 1998, 2004 and 2010 Surveys*. Toronto: Centre for the Study of Education and Work, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.